

The Most Important Person in the Room

Category: Bedside Manner

written by Sara Ann Conkling | September 6, 2023

No one tells you when you are having surgery that the surgeon is not the most important person in the room. In terms of safety, it's the anesthesiologist. I learned this the hard way.

After general anesthesia, with a morphine overdose, I woke up so sick I was praying to die. On another occasion, a failed epidural attempt punctured my dura and injected lidocaine into my spinal nerves. The latter resulted in a near-death dural leak and permanent spine injuries. After both, I had been prematurely discharged – essentially abandoned as the anesthesiologist ran off to the next case.

By the time I met Dr. C., I had had: a heart-wrenching conversation with my surgeon; a chat with the executive wing of the hospital, asking them who on their staff they would recommend for anesthesia; and, many near-somnolent hours reading Miller's *Anesthesia*, having acquired my own personal copy. The book has over three thousand pages, and I read the whole thing.

I insisted on an appointment with Dr. C. well before my surgery, which was itself unusual. I met him at the hospital and he ushered me into a room that was empty, except for a number of chairs. I took one and expected him to take the one across from me. Instead, he took the chair right next to mine, only inches away.

I was anxious as I unfurled my tales of anesthesia woe, my fears, and the anesthesia plan I had crafted myself after all those late nights with Mr. Miller. Dr. C. listened patiently and intently. When I was done, his first words were, "It's a good plan; it's the one I would have suggested." He went on to tell me he would not leave the room during my anesthesia, and he would also be there when I woke up to tell me exactly how it went. I would also be overnight in the hospital for something that was ordinarily a day surgery, so that anything that came up could be promptly addressed.

When we rose to leave, I was still shaking. Dr. C. reached out to hug me. He didn't let go until the shaking stopped. Probably it was just a few seconds, but it felt like an eternity. "I'm going to be there; it's going to be okay," he said into the ear that was buried into his shoulder.

And it was.

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